

COMMENT

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Tunnel Vision Takes its Toll on OUTA



By Busani Ngcaweni

Scintillating or dumbfounding? That is the dilemma I faced after putting myself through the 331 pages of Wayne Duvenage's book, *The E-Tolls Saga*. Was it many hours well spent on a chilly Wednesday morning, especially for a miserably slow reader like myself, I wondered.

Appreciating the daunting task of putting together a book with demanding publishers like Pan Macmillan, the first adjective rang true. One is always fascinated by the idea of another South African book hitting the bookshelves. Even more so when the author is someone you know and better still, when the subject in question is as familiar as the "E-Tolls Saga" which Duvenage writes about.

As one thinks hard of the contents

and conclusions of the book, the switch to dumbfounding looms larger than the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project. How did Wayne arrive at this point, downplaying all the facts and science before him?

Let us look at two major conclusions in the book to test its rigour. Hopefully, in the end, readers will make up their own minds about whether to treat the book as an intellectual canon on public policy or just a collection of thoughts and media statements meant to amplify a narrow ideological standpoint.

The book concludes that sustaining the electronic mode of payment to charge users of the Gauteng freeway network is illegitimate because the public was not adequately consulted and where they were, they

overwhelmingly "rejected the e-tolls".

Yet it is a matter of public record that for more than two years prior to the adoption of the new e-toll dispensation, government listened to the public's concerns and responded to legitimate perceptions about the costs of transport associated with e-tolling.

In addition, following another round of consultations, the new dispensation offers reduced maximum limits for all users and a simplified system which will allow infrequent users of the e-tolled roads defined free passage.

During these consultations on the future of e-tolling on the Gauteng freeways, a multitude of factors were taken into account, one of which was how to best look after the interests of poor and marginalised communities.

One of the notable dynamics of the opposition to open road tolling has been the way in which the interests of disparate groupings in society converged into common opposition to a system designed to find a long-term solution to the legacy of apartheid spatial planning.

Middle-class interests, predictably, took a populist approach to build an anti-government narrative. The most vocal opponents of e-tolling shared a common agenda with opposition political parties and received ready funding and logistical support for their campaigns.

The book documents some of these marriages of convenience crowned by the DA's funding of OUTA, thus making it difficult to believe that OUTA is not the party's civil society proxy.

Political expediency took precedence over a purely infrastructural matter. In what has since become a theatre of the liberal offensive, we saw a manifestation of what Mahatma Gandhi identified as one of the seven social sins: politics without principle. Look no further than the Western Cape where the tolling of Chapman's Peak is embraced, but maybe only just, and no further.

Even as we have referred to recent consultation processes which build on the work that started around 2007, we fail to understand why Duvenage would come to the dishonest conclusion that there had been no consultation and if there was, it was just "a farce".

In Gauteng Premier Makhura's review panel processes, records show that many submissions called for the retention of e-tolls, albeit with lower caps and administrative simplicity. As asserted in this article, that has been taken care of in the new dispensation and compliance is expected to rise over the next two years.

The second dumbfounding and perhaps most ideologically pointed conclusion in the book regards the fuel levy as an alternative to e-tolls.

Rehashing hundreds of his press statements on the matter, the author sees higher fuel levies as a panacea to pay for an improved freeway system without explaining to the public the downstream impact on transport costs, inflation and the prices of all consumer goods.

Fuel levy lobbyists have often expressed the view that e-tolling would place an additional burden on the poor who pay an inordinate percentage of their income on transport-related costs.

The reality is that research by various scholars shows in great detail why the user-pay principle is the most effective method to pay for vital economic infrastructure and restrict the burden on the poor.

The fuel levy is not a user pay mechanism because it is indiscriminate. So, for example, a car owner and or taxi operator confined to Tembisa, let's say, can't be exempted even though he does not use the GFIP network. Taking science into account, the Premier's panel advised against the fuel levy.

Compared to a fuel levy, e-tolling is a flexible system which can be easily adapted to provide relief for commuters who make use of public transport or who plan their journeys to take place outside peak hours. This is exactly what Government has done, through the National Department of Transport, with its decision to exempt registered public transport from e-tolling in Gauteng.

Given the fact that close to 69% of the population of Gauteng use taxis to commute, the exemptions make e-tolling the most pro-poor alternative for the funding of the freeway system.

Other methods such as fuel taxes and a hike in licence fees will have a direct impact on public transport

operators and immediately get passed on to the commuters in the form of higher fares. Yet we all agree that an integrated public transit system in Gauteng is overdue as a matter of urgency.

The reality is that Government's decision – made almost a decade ago – to improve the Gauteng freeway network and to finance it through an open-road tolling system, was not taken in a hurry. Public policy making is much more conscientious than suggested.

It grew out of a clear recognition that well-planned and well-maintained roads are only some elements of a broader approach to undoing the spatial legacy of apartheid, reducing the "commuting burden" – as described by the National Development Plan – and creating a more equitable transport system.

The new dispensation continues to recognise poor communities and has introduced changes which will benefit the poor. The majority of low-income earners use public transport to commute to their places of work. Under the new deal public transport – registered buses and taxis – continue to be exempt from e-tolls.

Imagine Sipho from Soweto who only travels twice a year to Soshanguve to make peace with his in-laws: with new 30 free gantry passes, he does not have to bother about e-tolls. Isn't that a material response to public concerns and reduction of administrative burden on road users?

Finally, the new dispensation ensures that a well-designed and well-maintained national and provincial road network will contribute to government's developmental objectives to address the triple threats of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

The thing about writing a book, Mr Duvenage, is that once it is published, you lose your innocence, your privacy and all the privileges that goes with being a normal person. In other words, writing a book is like being elected into political office. You subject yourself to scrutiny, to praise, to a dipper measuring stick. You literally become a subject in the world of literature.

As a book writer myself (and Mr Duvenage has contributed a chapter

on e-tolls in one of my books), I wish to congratulate Wayne for this achievement.

It takes courage to condense one's story in book form especially in South Africa where publishers always think of money first and the story later. Whilst I vehemently disagree with the main storyline in this book (especially the suggestion that e-tolls are threatening the Constitutional order), I commiserate with the nervous condition he experienced throughout the publishing process and understand why close to a quarter of the book is tautologous.

Again, I empathise: book writing is a punishing enterprise especially if you collaborate with a journalist who is emotionally attached to the subject you are writing about.

Truth be told, the book should have ended in the dying paragraphs of page 299. It surprisingly doesn't and adds further politically charged sections which include another ideological let-out where a subtle call is made for a coalition of regime change led by the "Club of Active South African Citizens" modeled along the 1970s "Club of Rome".

In all honesty, although the book fails to declare this, Wayne has scored victories for his constituency only if the tunnel vision can be removed to see this road to success.

Facts are: people are now paying less to drive on GFIP. The administration burden has been reduced with measures like 30 free gantry passes. The system is simpler especially when you update your car details - now a FICA requirement. Public transport users and taxis are exempted. The e-tag is not a requirement for registration and compliance. Not paying e-tolls is now a traffic offence and no longer a criminal offence. Every struggle has minimum and maximum victories. If his was a struggle to reduce the burden on the poor (as often claimed), then isn't it a victory that OUTA has scored? If it is an ideological stance against the ruling party, then they live to fight another day.

I particularly wish Mr Duvenage well as he contemplates exiting OUTA and embarking on the more difficult road of management consulting. ■